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USDA Makes Up to \$15 Million Available Nationally for Innovative Conservation Approaches

Lakewood, CO – The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is now accepting proposals for funding through the Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) program. The CIG program is designed to stimulate the development and adoption of innovative conservation approaches and technologies while leveraging Federal investment in environmental enhancement and protection, in conjunction with agricultural production. **Applications must be received in the NRCS National Office by Monday, March 28, 2005, 5:00p.m. Eastern Standard Time (EST).**

CIG is authorized under the NRCS' Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and within 2005 up to \$15 million of funds will be available. Under CIG, EQIP funds are used to award competitive grants to non-Federal governmental or non-governmental organizations, Tribes, or individuals.

CIG competition(s) will emphasize projects that have a goal of providing benefits over a large geographic area. These projects may be watershed-based, regional, multi-State, or nationwide in scope. Applications should describe the use of innovative technologies or approaches, or both, to address a natural resource conservation concern or concerns.

"This program enables NRCS to work with other public and private entities and individuals to accelerate technology transfer and adoption of promising technologies and approaches to address some of the Nation's most pressing natural resource concerns, says Allen Green, NRCS State Conservationist, Lakewood, CO. "CIG will benefit agricultural producers by providing more options for environmental enhancement and compliance with Federal, State, and local regulations."

This year's *National* priority natural resource concerns for possible funding include: Water Resources, Soil Resources, Atmospheric Resources, Grazing Land Health and Forest Health, and Wildlife Habitat.

At least 50 percent of the total cost of the project must come from non-Federal matching funds (cash and in-kind contributions) provided by the grantee. The grantee also is responsible for providing the technical assistance required to successfully complete the project. NRCS will provide technical oversight for each project receiving an award.

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CIG applications will be accepted from State or local units of government, federally recognized Tribes, non-governmental organizations, and individuals. Applications will be accepted from all 50 States, the Caribbean Area (Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands), and the Pacific Basin Area (Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands). NRCS will accept applications for single or multi-year projects not-to-exceed three years from eligible entities. Proposed projects must involve EQIP-eligible producers.

“CIG is not a research program. Instead, it is a vehicle to stimulate the adoption of conservation approaches or technologies that have been studied sufficiently to indicate a likelihood of success and are likely candidates for eventual technology transfer,” Green goes on to say. *“This program will fund projects targeting innovative, on-the ground conservation, including pilot projects and field demonstrations.”* Proposed projects must conform to the description of innovative conservation projects or activities published in the RFP.

NRCS recognizes the need to provide special consideration to underrepresented or historically underserved producers. CIG offers two programmatic exceptions intended to encourage the participation of beginning and limited resource farmers and ranchers, and Tribes, in CIG. Each year, up to 10 percent of National CIG funds may be set aside for applicants who are beginning or limited resource farmers or ranchers, or Tribes, or community-based organizations comprised of or representing these entities. The second exception allows applicants from any of the underrepresented groups to derive a higher percentage of project matching funds from in kind contributions.

In addition to this nationwide grants competition, a State component of CIG will be piloted in a limited number of States in fiscal year 2005. Colorado has been selected as one of the pilot states. This component of the CIG program will emphasize projects that have a goal of providing benefits within a limited geographic area.

Projects may be farm-based, multi-county, small watershed, or Statewide in scope. Details of the State component will be available in March of 2005.

Interested parties may visit <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/cig> for copies of the RFP or for any additional information regarding the CIG program. The RFP will specify the information required from applicants. Complete applications must be mailed to the NRCS National office at the address identified in the RFP.

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